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ABSTRACT

In 1995, Alabama joined many other states in passing mandatory character education as a response to violence in schools. Although the "Virtue of the Week" program had been implemented in Alabama schools for several years, little evaluation has been done to measure its effectiveness. In spring 2001, a study was carried out to analyze the effectiveness of character education based on the perceptions of Alabama public school administrators and teachers. Questions asked included: Did character education decrease discipline problems? Did it decrease sexual harassment? Did it result in better behaved students? Is it effective? A total of 249 practitioners participated in the study. Surveys asked for descriptive data and statements about character education. Likert-scale responses were analyzed statistically. Finding show that educators are supportive of character education. They feel it is needed in the schools and it results in improved behavior, fewer discipline problems, and less violence and sexual harassment. Their perceptions are that students are better citizens because of character education. They also believe it is an effective program in their schools. Both administrators and teachers felt the curriculum was adequate, lessons were relevant, and teachers were dedicated to teaching character education. Highlights of the Character Education Act are attached. (RT)

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Educators' Perceptions of Character Education

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Educators' Perceptions of Character Education

We sow a thought and reap an act
We sow an act and reap a habit
We sow a habit and reap a character
We sow a character and reap a destiny

William Makepeace Thackeray
19th Century Novelist

Thackeray's quote seems especially relevant in today's school climate. Despite character education being part of the foundation of American public education, academics had crowded it out of most secondary schools by the 1990's.

However, the violence in schools, particularly the incident at Columbine High School and others, created a public awareness that something was lacking in the totally academic school setting. The Ethics of American Youth (2001) reports 43% of high school boys and 37% of middle school boys feel threatening or hitting someone who makes you angry is alright. This is especially unsettling when one considers that 60% of high school boys and 31% of middle school boys believed they could get guns. Not surprisingly, statistics indicate that 1 in 15 students have been threatened or injured with a weapon each school year (Kagan, 2001). Many educators have contended that schools must respond - not just watch - as our society battles moral problems (Lickona, 1991). Dr. Martin Luther King adamantly stated, "Intelligence plus character - that is the goal of true education" (1947).

In 1995, Alabama joined many other states in passing mandatory character education. All schools in Alabama must teach character education 10 minutes per day. Using the teaching approach, "Virtue of the Week," particular virtues such as patience, loyalty, courtesy and honesty, are taught. (Highlights of the Character Education Act

are attached.) Although this had been implemented in Alabama schools for several years, little evaluation has been done to measure its effectiveness.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to analyze the effectiveness of character education based on the perceptions of administrators and teachers in public schools in Alabama. Specifically, the answers to the following questions were sought:

- Did character education decrease discipline problems?
- Did character education decrease sexual harassment?
- Did character education result in better behaved students?
- Is character education effective?

In addition, the study asked:

- Are students serious about learning character education?
- Are students better citizens because of character education?
- Should character education be taught?
- Are teachers dedicated to teaching character education?
- Are the lessons interesting?
- Do the lessons seem relevant?
- Do all teachers teach character education the same?

Methods

Sample

In order to get a cross section of perceptions of educators in the North Alabama school area, surveys were given to teachers and administrators pursuing graduate degrees. Individual graduate students from various schools were asked to have 25 faculty members from their respective schools complete the survey.

The participants in the study included 39 administrators and 210 teachers. The elementary level was represented by 9 administrators and 73 teachers. There were 7 middle school administrators and 33 middle school teachers. There were 104 teachers and 23 administrators from the high school level. Totally, 249 educators were part of this study.

Procedures

Educators pursuing either a Master's degree in secondary education or in administration were asked to distribute surveys to faculty members of their respective schools. Self-explanatory directions for completing the survey were attached so that all participants could read these, thus establishing some measure of uniformity in administration.

This research was done during the spring of 2001. Surveys were given out at various schools and collected again during the first two weeks of May. After respondents were given the surveys, they had one week to complete them. Some respondents took two weeks. Three middle schools, five elementary schools and five secondary schools, as well as one K-12 unit school, were represented in the study.

Instrumentation

The instrument was divided into two portions: descriptive data and statements about character education. Descriptive data ascertained the respondent's number of years in education, and the gender of the respondent. In addition, information was gathered about the size and level of the school at which the respondent worked.

The other section of the survey contained 12 statements to which the respondent was to mark his/her level of agreement. A five point Likert scale, (5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree and 1 = strongly disagree) was provided.

Findings

Teachers

Teachers were very positive about character education. In fact, elementary, middle school and high school teachers all had an average mean of 3.19 on overall agreement on the five-point Likert scale in which five was the highest level of agreement.

Interestingly, the level at which a teacher taught made no statistical difference in the responses. Because middle school teachers' responses were more closely aligned with those of elementary than high school, and there were few participants from this level, their responses were grouped together and shown with elementary responses. Table 1 shows the top six ranked items in descending order.

Table 1
Teachers' Perceptions of Character Education

Item	Elementary Mean	High School Mean
Students are better citizens because of this.	3.21	3.28
Curriculum is adequate.	3.24	3.39
Students behave better because of this.	3.33	3.31
Teachers are dedicated to teaching this.	3.41	3.27
Lessons are relevant.	3.70	3.63
Character education should be taught in schools.	4.15	4.19

Only two items received a rating below a 3. Teachers at all levels disagreed with the statement, "Character education is taught the same by all teachers in our school." Elementary teachers rated this 1.96; high school teachers gave this a 2.10. The next lowest ranked item referred to students. In response to "Students are serious about character education," elementary teachers had a mean of 2.95 and high school teachers gave this a 2.73.

The amount of teaching experience was not a statistically significant factor. The areas in which teachers taught was a significant factors in seven of the items. In all cases those in business vocational areas were most positive. Those in the core courses were the next most positive while those in academic/elective areas were the least positive about character education. It should be noted that art/music teachers, as well as physical education teachers, were deleted from this ANOVA test because of the small sample sizes.

Administrators

Administrators seemed even more positive than teachers about character education. The most positive group was the elementary administrators. The overall mean score from this group was 3.61. High school administrators were only slightly less enthusiastic, having an overall mean of 3.57. Elementary and high school principals agreed with teachers on the number one rated item: "I believe character education should be taught in the schools."

Administrators also concurred with teachers on the item they least agreed with: "Character education is taught the same by all teachers in our school." Table 2 shows in descending order the means of six top ranked items of elementary administrators. These six items also contain the five statements with which high school administrators most agree. Table 2 shows several items received the exact same mean from high school administrators. Also, it should be noted that the 3.65 mean, the second highest given by high school administrators, was also given to the statement not shown on the Table. "Character education has decreased sexual harassment in my school," tied for the second highest item for the high school administrators, but was the third lowest ranked item for elementary administrators, with a mean of 3.33. Possibly this item did not seem relevant at the lower level.

There was no statistically significant difference between the responses of administrators at the elementary, middle and high school levels. And like the teachers, middle school administrators responded most like their colleagues at the elementary level. Therefore, responses of these two groups were combined.

Table 2
Administrators' Perceptions of Character Education

Item	Elementary Mean	High School Mean
Lessons are relevant.	3.78	3.87
Teachers are dedicated to teaching character education.	3.78	3.70
Character education is an effective program.	3.78	3.70
Students behave better because of character education.	3.89	3.87
Students are better citizens because of character education.	4.0	3.65
Character education should be taught in school.	4.67	4.61

Conclusions

This study indicates that educators are supportive of character education. They feel it is needed in the schools and it results in improved behavior, fewer discipline problems, less violence and even less sexual harassment in school. Their perceptions are that students are better citizens because of character education. (This is in spite of the fact that teachers on all levels were somewhat negative about the seriousness of students concerning character education.) In addition, educators believe it is an effective program in their schools.

As far as program concerns, both administrators and teachers felt curriculum was adequate, lessons were relevant and teachers were dedicated to teaching character education.

Highlights of the Act

Action:	Develop and implement a comprehensive character education program
Who:	The State Board of Education and all local boards
When:	By November 1, 1995 - *within ninety (90) days of effective date (August 1, 1995) of this Act.*
Reference:	**Act # 95-313**

CURRICULUM REQUIREMENTS

Grade level: All grades (K-12)

Quantity of time: Ten minutes per day minimum

Content: Instruction focusing upon the students' development of the following character traits:

cheerfulness	loyalty
citizenship	patience
cleanliness	patriotism
compassion	perseverance
cooperation	punctuality
courage	respect for others
courtesy	respect for the environment
creativity	school pride
diligence	self-control
fairness	self-respect
generosity	sportsmanship
honesty	tolerance
kindness	

ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENT

Each plan of instruction shall include the Pledge of Allegiance to the American Flag.

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